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A Cold Welcome for the Black Widow

Soviet leaders face a dilemma that is unusual, to say the least, in the annals of diplomacy: Shall they assent, publicly or privately, to U.S. plans to fly U-2 spy planes near the Soviet-Turkish border to check on Russian compliance with the new strategic arms limitation treaty? Or shall they say *nyet*—and thereby deal a damaging, perhaps fatal, blow to the prospects for Senate ratification of the treaty?

One of the biggest obstacles facing SALT II, when it is submitted to the U.S. Senate for ratification, is the question of whether it can be adequately verified in light of the loss of two U.S. monitoring stations in Iran.

President Carter has repeatedly insisted that the answer is yes. But, in order to make that claim more credible, the Administration wants to conduct U-2 flights from a British base in Cyprus into Turkish airspace near the Soviet border. The purpose would be to monitor missile-test launchings from the rocket complexes in Soviet Central Asia.

Turkish permission is necessary. And Turkey—~~not wishing to antagonize Moscow or leftists in its own population at a time of economic deterioration and political turmoil~~—says that such flights will be permitted only if the Soviet Union does not object.

The United States has already sounded the Soviets on the issue.

No doubt the Kremlin feels a strong compulsion to respond with a blunt, unambiguous no. After all, the U-2—the same type of aircraft that was shot down over the Soviet heartland in May, 1960—is indelibly imprinted on Russian minds as a spy plane. The idea of publicly welcoming the “black widow of espionage,” as it is called by Kremlin propagandists, into the sensitive airspace near the Turkish-Soviet border is probably more than they can be expected to accept.

However, the Soviet government wants very much to see SALT II ratified by the Senate. And, as American diplomats have pointed out to Moscow, an active Russian effort to prevent the proposed U-2 flights in Turkey would be a major windfall to treaty opponents.

Washington is said to have received some indications that the Kremlin will try to finesse the issue by giving the Turkish government a quiet, off-the-record nod of approval for the flights—or by ignoring the issue altogether, thereby enabling the Turks to interpret silence as consent.

The question of whether Turkey will obstinately demand public rather than private assurances will be influenced, it seems clear, by whether the United States and its NATO partners are able to deliver the economic and military aid that has been promised. □